



# LEVERAGING PLATFORMS FOR THE GOOD OF ALL

Insights from Leading  
Social Entrepreneurs



**ASPIRe**  
AN ASHOKA & SOCIETAL PLATFORM INITIATIVE

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# INTRODUCTION

Ashoka is a global association of leading social entrepreneurs that has been supporting remarkable change agents and their pathbreaking initiatives for over 40 years. Over this period, Ashoka has distilled and spread profound learnings on entrepreneurship that have helped shape the citizen sector around the world to adopt and strengthen system-changing approaches to societal problems.

Societal Platform is an ecosystem of entrepreneurial tech leaders and philanthropists that is carrying out pioneering work in redefining the field of societal platforms and digital public infrastructure in India and globally.

In 2020, Ashoka<sup>1</sup> and Societal Platform<sup>2</sup> joined forces to launch ASPIRe.<sup>3</sup> Supported by Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies,<sup>4</sup> the joint initiative seeks to explore and learn how platforms can be leveraged by social entrepreneurs to support their system-change work and scale up impact.

From the experience of Ashoka's partner Societal Platform and by studying the work of Ashoka Fellows who have built platforms for impact, we have learned that the inherent feature of platforms is the capability for large-scale impact achieved by connecting exponentially large numbers of stakeholders in networks that interact openly, exchange value, and evolve while activating agency and catalyzing participation. All these merits make platforms a useful strategy and tool in advancing an 'everyone a changemaker' world.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the system-change potential of diverse platforms by showcasing strategies of Ashoka Fellows that are effectively leveraging platforms for systemic change. Towards this end, the paper shares key design principles<sup>5</sup> that should be taken into account and applied when developing platforms for the good of all.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ashoka.org](http://www.ashoka.org)

<sup>2</sup> <https://societalplatform.org>

<sup>3</sup> [aspire.ashoka.org](http://aspire.ashoka.org)

<sup>4</sup> [rohininilekani.org](http://rohininilekani.org)

<sup>5</sup> The design principles have been distilled from the core values of Societal Thinking curated by Societal Platform. In this paper, we have adopted and modified these core values (under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License) to reflect how platform design principles are manifested in the work of Ashoka Fellows.

While for-profit online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have catalyzed huge changes in our society, this paper uses the term to refer to platforms that work for ‘the good of all.’ These have the explicit intent to contribute to positive social change and not to make a profit for the shareholders.

### **Why is this paper relevant today?**

Platforms have irreversibly changed the way industries operate. Some of the largest businesses today—such as Amazon, Spotify, Uber, WhatsApp, and Facebook—are global platforms. A worldwide trend towards universal access to smartphones and mobile internet is enabling more and more people to participate in the digital revolution. With a focus on offering the means of connecting networks and facilitating value exchange between them, platforms have opened up novel models for organizing that are both efficient as well as dramatically scalable. Platform businesses don’t own the means of production; instead, they create the means of connection. Successful platforms facilitate exchange by reducing transaction costs and/or by enabling innovation by the network.

This makes platform models an attractive strategy for social entrepreneurs who want to spread the ability to solve a problem among many stakeholders by activating their agency, providing them with useful insights, and enabling large numbers of people to get better at solving major societal problems in their local contexts. We anticipate that like the business world, the citizen sector will also turn to platforms as one of the strategies to create at-scale system change quickly and efficiently.

Last year (2021), Wikipedia—a highly-successful example of a platform for the ‘good of all’—was the seventh-most visited website in the world. Co-founded by Ashoka Fellow Jimmy Wales, this crowdsourced encyclopedia, curated and authored by several hundreds of thousands of editors, dramatically democratized and decentralized the process of knowledge creation and made information accessible as a public good. By opening up content creation and editing to the users, Wikipedia continues to evolve and renew resources that always stay relevant and up-to-date. Wikipedia’s strict rules on verifiability, impartiality and objectivity of information ensure that even after two decades of its launch it endures as a credible and free source of information for all. This is considerably different from the voluminous encyclopedias of the past that periodically lost relevance and had to be updated by experts, reprinted, and sold at a considerable cost, making it available to only the few who could afford it.

There are several examples of Ashoka Fellows using platforms to scale up impact and advance system change. The objectives of this paper are to learn from and share their experiences, extrapolate trends, and design principles that can be useful for other social entrepreneurs. This document can also function as a valuable resource for funders who are exploring revolutionary new avenues and methodologies for creating and contributing to spreading system change.

## Methodology

We set out to write this paper with four key questions in mind:

- How can platforms help create system change?
- What information, skills and know-how do social entrepreneurs need to have to take advantage of this opportunity?
- What are the learnings from some of the social entrepreneurs who have pioneered the effective use of social platforms?
- How can a set of design principles help us blueprint a platform for system change?

In addition to studying the models of Ashoka Fellows, we have also leveraged the knowledge created by our partner who distilled a set of core values of societal platforms. We developed a set of design principles on top of these core values, informed though the experiences of Ashoka Fellows.

The design principles include strategies that are very similar to the system change methodologies that define the work of Ashoka Fellows as well as other approaches that are more specific to digital platforms. These are geared to bring about change based on the unique qualities of digital platforms—the power of data and intelligence, quick interactions and exchange at scale, and the capacity for openness and transparency.

We studied Ashoka Fellows who use platforms in their theory of change and reviewed their work through the lens of the design principles. We also linked the design principles to the core levers of system change to create a framework that should help social entrepreneurs understand and leverage the system-changing potential of platforms. The framework is illustrated through detailed how-tos from the work of these Fellows with the hope that this formulates a ‘recipe for success’ for anyone considering using a platform to create positive change.

## Objectives of this paper

- To understand if and how the design principles highlighted by us are manifested in the work of Ashoka Fellows (so that they can become a reference for other social entrepreneurs who want to explore the use of platforms for the ‘good of all’).
- To show the potential and powerful role that platforms can play in creating lasting system change.
- To share how Ashoka Fellows are leveraging platforms to drive system change.

# The Role of Platforms in System Change

## What is a Platform?

It is important to keep in mind that a platform is an entire approach and isn't just a mobile app or a website; it is a holistic model that creates impact by facilitating exchanges of value between two or more interdependent groups, usually consumers and producers. To enable this exchange, platforms build and harness large, scalable networks of users and resources that can be accessed on demand, thus meeting the needs of users at an exponential scale in an efficient manner. While similar in their structure and ability to catalyze interactions at scale, all platforms are not the same. They differ greatly based on the intent for which they are created and used for.

The objective of the platforms created for system change is to empower not just their users but the larger ecosystem as well. This is achieved by sharing data and providing opportunities for stakeholders to engage in problem-solving for the 'good of all.' At the other end of the spectrum are platforms that are created with the business aim to maximize profit. We have highlighted below several key areas that distinguish between business platforms and platforms for system change designed to solve a social (and/or environmental) issue. Please note: there are also platforms that fall between the two ends of the spectrum.

## Core Differences Between For-Profit Platforms and Platforms for System Change\*

	For-Profit Platform	Platform for System Change
<b>Intent</b>	Create effective business models with the intent to maximize profit for shareholders.	Address a problem and improve societal outcomes with the intent to deliver value for society at large.
<b>Relationship with their users</b>	Designed to continuously grow the number of users and leverage the attention / time they spend on the platform to accrue more value for the platform.	Is aimed to deliver maximum value and empower the user.
<b>Sustainability</b>	Aimed at finding a product to market fit and earn revenue from the services and transactions on the platform, or through advertisement and user data.	Designed so that everyone can freely access the value it creates, with a variety of financial models to sustain operations and growth. May adopt a 'platform as a paid service' model to cover the costs, but the goal is to remove the access barrier for the end user to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized communities have equal access to value created.
<b>Use of data, insights and knowledge</b>	Uses customer data to maximize profit and identify useful business insights and opportunities.	Data and insights are shared with the ecosystem to improve the efficacy of the entire system and benefit a variety of stakeholders, as opposed to improving the platform's own competitive advantage.
<b>Digital Infrastructure</b>	Does not allow others to build on the same infrastructure: i.e., uses a controlled infrastructure.	Partly or fully allows others to build on the same infrastructure and/or extend the existing infrastructure. Often uses open-source mechanisms to empower partner organizations with infrastructure.

\*This table is adopted and modified from Societal Platform (under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License).

To explain system change, one of the tools used by Ashoka is the 5R Framework that helps analyze any system through five key elements: Results, Roles, Relationships, Rules, and Resources.<sup>6</sup> These 5R's are used to assess and describe the system and identify key levers for system change. Ashoka uses this framework as one of the instruments to help Fellows analyze the problem systemically and envision the system change that they aim to orchestrate. For more details, please refer to Ashoka's System Change online course.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this paper explores how platforms can support social entrepreneurs to create a system change. To do that we first identified nine design principles of platforms for the 'good of all' and then correlated these to five levers of system change in what we believe will be the most helpful in fostering a deeper understanding of the platform's system change potential.

The design principles refer to a platform as a model and not just a piece of technology and include both digital and offline interventions. In particular, the first principle (Align Towards Better Outcomes: System Leadership) and the last principle (Cultivate Change Offline) refer to offline efforts that are connected and are, in fact, essential to the system change orchestrated by the platform.

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<sup>6</sup> Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development  
[www.usaid.gov/policy/local-systems-framework](http://www.usaid.gov/policy/local-systems-framework)

<sup>7</sup> <https://fellowship-europe.ashoka.org/system-change-online-course>

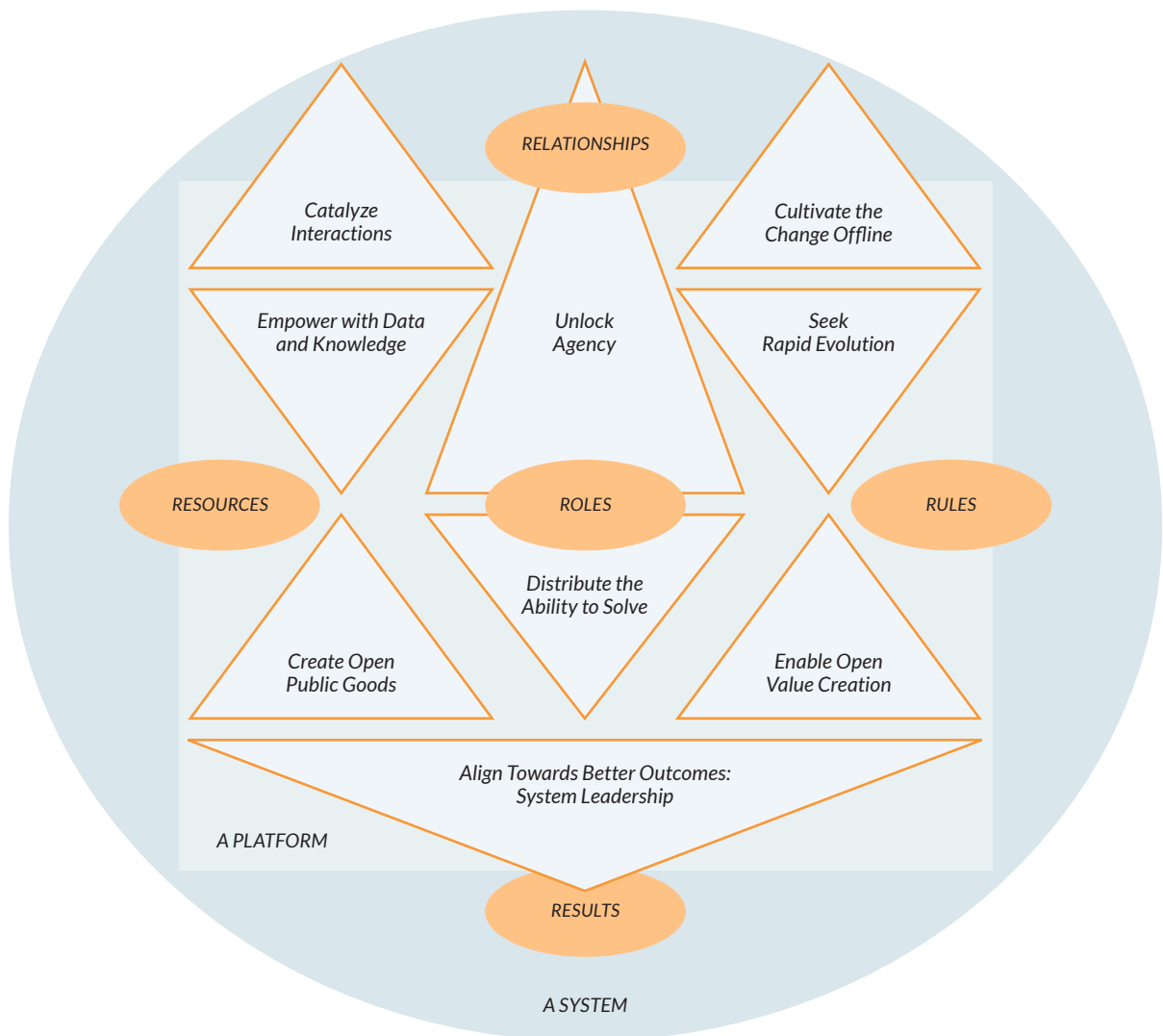


## DESIGN PRINCIPLES OF PLATFORMS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

The Elements of The System	Platform Design Principles	Explanation
<b>Results</b> <i>How can a platform help solve a systemic problem?</i>	<b>ALIGN TOWARDS BETTER OUTCOMES: SYSTEM LEADERSHIP</b>	Help stakeholders in the system define and aim for a better set of outcomes than is currently being achieved.
<b>Resources</b> <i>How can platforms allow for better access and flow of resources?</i>	<b>CREATE OPEN PUBLIC GOODS</b>	Make scarce resources of knowledge, technology, expertise, connections, and data openly and abundantly available.
	<b>EMPOWER WITH DATA AND KNOWLEDGE</b>	Capture, analyze and share data and insights in ways that enable all stakeholders to make better decisions, and anticipate and solve problems effectively.
<b>Roles</b> <i>How can platforms allow stakeholders to play new roles in the system?</i>	<b>UNLOCK AGENCY</b>	Design solutions that allow for freedom of choice and ability to act, particularly for the groups whose participation was earlier limited.
	<b>DISTRIBUTE THE ABILITY TO SOLVE</b>	Create solutions that engage diverse stakeholders to solve the problem at scale in their contexts.
<b>Rules</b> <i>How can platforms help transform the rules that govern the system?</i>	<b>ENABLE OPEN VALUE CREATION</b>	Create conditions that allow for individuals and institutions to be connected in networks to co-create and exchange value openly.
	<b>SEEK RAPID EVOLUTION</b>	Design systems that can learn and evolve quickly in response to new and/or local challenges and opportunities.
<b>Relationships</b> <i>How can platforms change relationships between the actors in the system?</i>	<b>CATALYZE INTERACTIONS</b>	Create new ways for stakeholders to connect and exchange value, and become the self-propagating network of people and institutions that spread change.
	<b>CULTIVATE THE CHANGE OFFLINE*</b>	Societal change typically requires a change in the behaviors of large numbers of people. While digital platforms allow to scale certain interactions quickly on a unified infrastructure, local leadership and engaged networks and culturally accepted and inclusive solutions are essential for behavioral change to take hold at scale.

\*We have added this design principle to the principles from Societal Platform after observing it in the work of Ashoka Fellows. Refer to page 15 for more details.

## Nine Design Principles to Use Platforms as a Tool to Advance System Change



In the following sections we detail the design principles and illustrate each with specific practices and how-to examples from the work of Ashoka Fellows. We also showcase how applying these principles triggers a change in the system, through the lens of key elements of the system: Results, Resources, Roles, Rules, and Relationships.

## Results

The goal of every social entrepreneur is to achieve outcomes that significantly improve the system. Development efforts are typically organized around realizing a specific result, such as reducing infant mortality, improving early-grade reading proficiency, or increasing access to potable water.

A system change approach entails determining precisely what needs to be altered in the current system in order to deliver better outcomes. It often also necessitates orchestrating the stakeholders of a system to pursue a shared vision, each contributing uniquely to it. It is a long-term strategy that takes years of careful listening, of engendering a shared set of values and vision, and weaving networks and connections into the ecosystem.

Platforms are designed to enable interaction and improve participation and thus can be useful in realigning and engaging stakeholders around new goals.



*How can a platform help solve a systemic problem?*

*Align Towards Better Outcomes:  
System Leadership*

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 1

# ALIGN TOWARDS BETTER OUTCOMES: SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

Aligning the system in the direction of a new set of outcomes requires system leadership. This is an approach that nurtures distributed leadership by aligning stakeholders around the values, beliefs, and goals of the system, even while they continue to play their intended roles. System leadership requires continuous facilitation of multi-sided dialogues to ensure that the goals of the stakeholders remain aligned. Platforms can support efforts in system leadership and can be designed to forge relationships, create new or different roles, and apply (or enforce) new rules. They enable the sharing of resources and solutions, the creation of feedback loops with previously excluded parts of the community, and inviting of new partners into the system to contribute to the setting of rules for exchange.

We have noticed that a significant amount of the work of Ashoka Fellows happens off the platform (even while simultaneously being informed by the data and insights collected through the platform), thereby facilitating the evolution of the entire network of actors.



## **PINBOX (Pension-in-the-Box)**

[www.pinboxsolutions.com](http://www.pinboxsolutions.com)

A compelling example of orchestrating the system is pinBox (pension-in-the-box) Solutions, co-founded by Ashoka Fellow Gautam Bhardwaj. pinBox Solutions supports the design, building and deployment of inclusive, digital micro-pension schemes that enable and encourage non-salaried workers to save for a secure and dignified retirement. To implement a micro-pension scheme, several actors need to come together, from government regulators to financial institutions as well as digital finance ecosystem and infrastructure players such as payment solution providers and national ID agencies, plus entities who employ or service informal sector workers.

Additionally, developing and encouraging regular savings behavior among people who have irregular incomes and who may be earning barely enough to cover their basic needs requires effective retirement literacy and incentives, which pinBox Solutions has mastered over the last two decades. The various components of the educational services for retirement literacy are made available through the platform, as well as other resources such as relevant data, research, and policy papers for advocacy and lobbying.

Offering micro-pension schemes across national borders adds several layers of contextual challenges including that of language, culture, demography, governance, and monetary regulations. In order to engage the specific groups of players necessary to launch such micro-pension schemes (i.e., actors who believe old age financial security is an important outcome to strive for), pinBox Solutions developed a pensionTech platform. The white-labeled and fully API-enabled digital micro-pension administration and delivery platform allows countries to leverage existing digital financial and pension infrastructure. This approach sidesteps the need to establish new institutional capacity, and partners and ecosystem stakeholders are able to spring into action on pension inclusion in a matter of weeks. Thus, pensionTech—which has been carefully designed and informed through years of implementation experience and insights—provides the core architecture for central issuance and administration of fully portable individual micro-pension accounts.

While providing a framework and an innovative implementation model, the platform also allows for contextual customization and adjustments. pinBox Solutions has been instrumental in designing national digital pension solutions for low-income non-salaried workers in Uganda, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and India.

### **SOLSHARE**

[www.me-solshare.com](http://www.me-solshare.com)

Ashoka Fellow Sebastian Groh envisions a future where millions of villagers are empowered to become energy producers and sellers. His organization SOLshare is gearing up the transition to renewable energy from the bottom-up by developing peer-to-peer microgrids and a trading platform through which people sell the excess solar energy generated by their solar home systems. SOLshare's platform is a powerful tool to advance a national utility model that allows for joint energy planning between the public and private sector, in which the 'private' unorganized sector—comprising decentralized, low-income, off-the-grid villages that produce energy—are able to partner in the national solar energy production system.

The SOLshare platform supports an ecosystem of partners to achieve better outcomes in terms of energy access (which is environmentally friendlier). The network of stakeholders engaged is diverse: partners for implementing the solar-home-systems, partners to develop solar-powered devices (like rickshaws) that are connected to the village grids, and partners that facilitate the mobile money transactions required for trade and income generation for villagers.

Through the platform, data about the peaks and lows in solar power storage and usage is shared so the entire ecosystem of partners can adapt their actions. Examples of this include the buying or selling of more energy-storage or energy-consuming devices, and applying differential pricing to energy (for example, during the day or night).

The platform and network are playing a pivotal role in the system change towards renewable energy in Bangladesh. In a regulatory sandbox environment, the government, market players, academia and SOLshare's network of partners are exploring ways to connect this decentralized solar-power production 'plant' (i.e., connected village grids) with the centralized national electricity grid—a revolution in the management of utilities significant beyond Bangladesh.

## Resources

Every system is dependent on a pool of resources: human talent, finance, knowledge, technology, information, and infrastructure. Financial resources, whether in the form of government budget flows, private sector investments, or donor grants, are likely to be central to any system. However, other resources are equally important. For example, natural resources in the form of fertile soil and adequate rainfall are essential for agriculture. Similarly, human resources such as trained teachers are a crucial input into the education system. Whatever their form may take, resources are essential inputs for any system to fuel interactions and produce results. One way to create system change is to increase, change, and add new resources into the system.

Traditional ways of thinking about creating system change through resources involve adding new or better ones (for example: training more or better teachers), increasing budgetary allocations, or building more physical infrastructure. While these methods produce significant results, they only deliver change in a linear fashion.

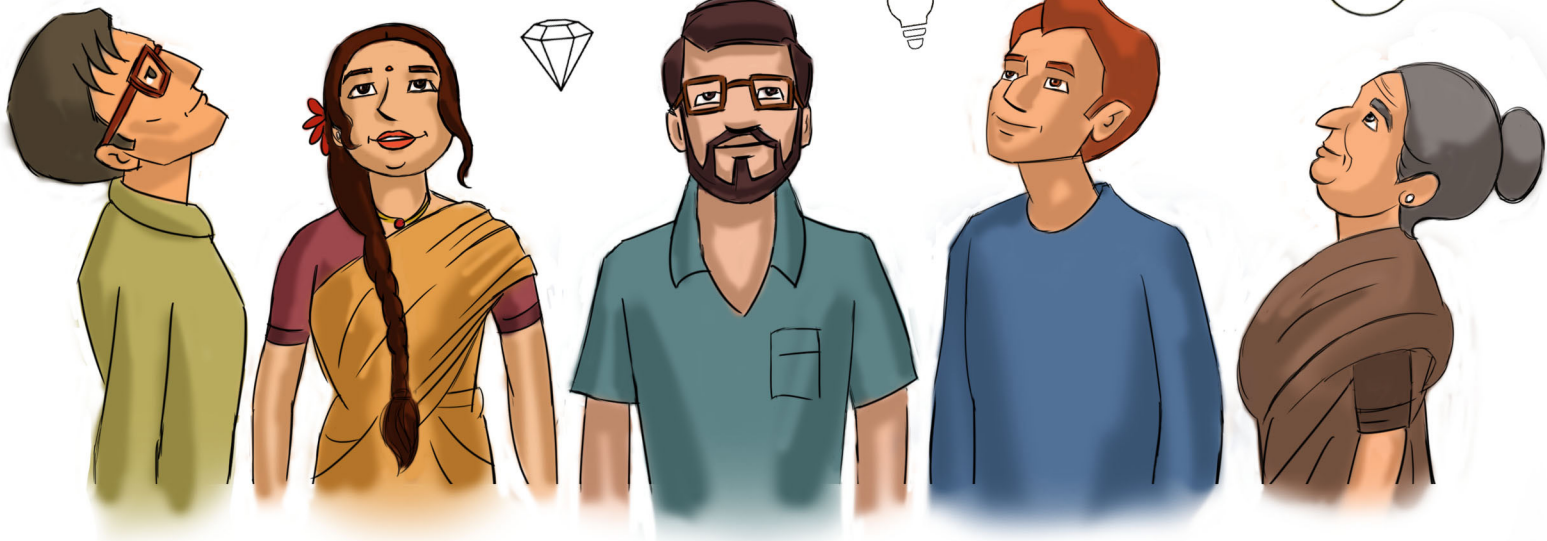
Platforms make it possible to increase access to certain kinds of resources exponentially, achieving scale faster and more efficiently. YouTube, for instance, has made it possible for anyone to create and share content; and now, every day upwards of 122 million people upload and watch entertainment and educational videos on this online platform.

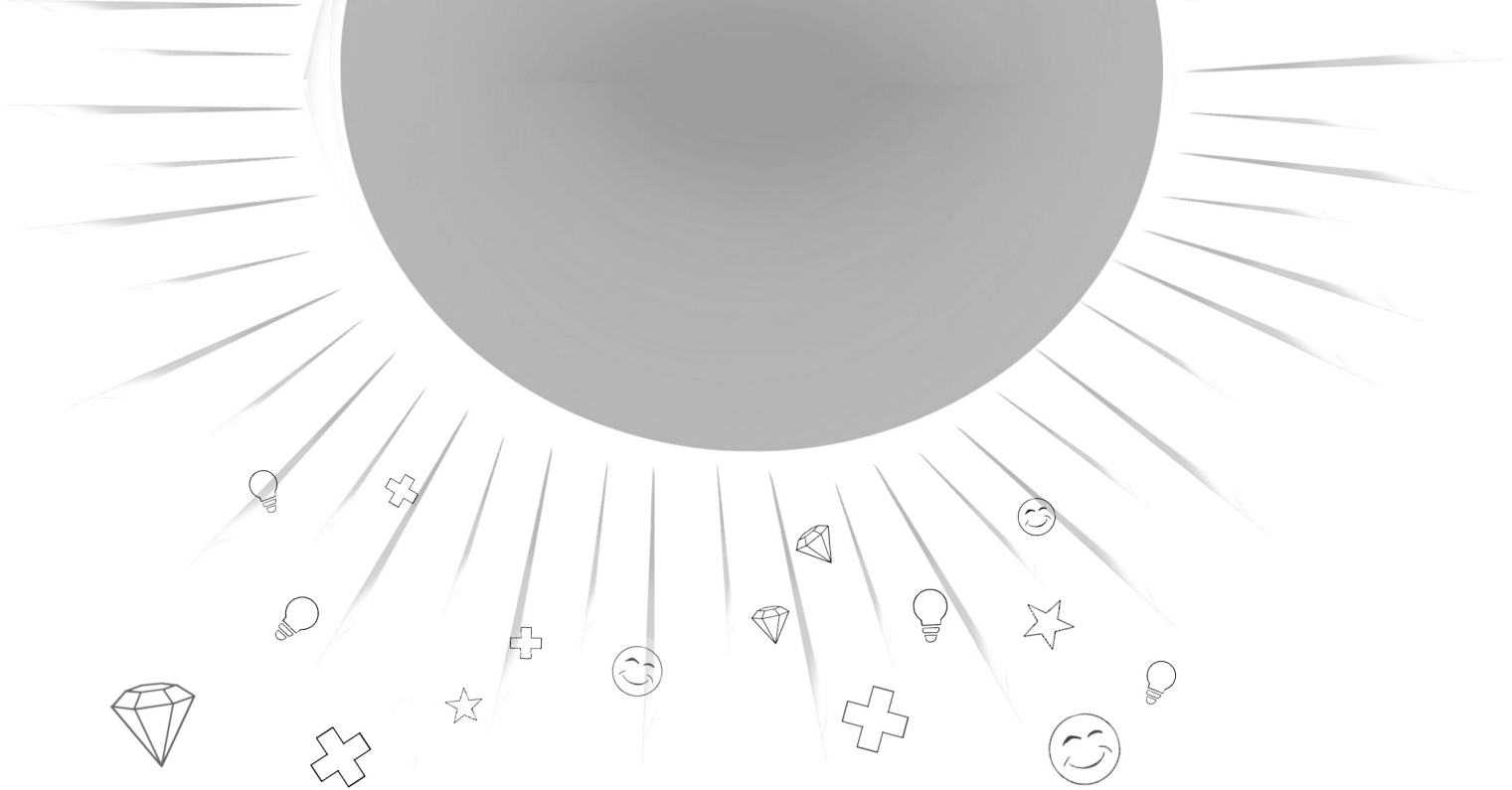


How can platforms allow for better access and flow of resources?

Create  
Open Public  
Goods

Empower  
with Data  
and Knowledge





## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 2

# Create Open Public Goods

The resources—knowledge, processes, technology, connections, data, etc.—required to resolve complex societal problems are often in short supply or unevenly distributed across the vast array of actors related to the problem. System change therefore often demands that scarce resources be made openly available to everyone as public goods. "Public good, is a product or service that is non-excludable and nondepletable (or "non-rivalrous"). A good is non-excludable if one cannot exclude individuals from enjoying its benefits when the good is provided. A good is nondepletable if one individual's enjoyment of the good does not diminish the amount of the good available to others."<sup>8</sup> This essentially implies that open and equitable access to relevant resources can enable their reuse and repurposing, boost productivity, and save duplication of effort. In some cases, the entire model can result in the creation of public goods; in others, certain components of technology, data, or knowledge can be turned into public goods.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-good-economics>

### **SERLO**

[www.en.serlo.org](http://www.en.serlo.org)

Ashoka Fellow Simon Köhl has created a Wikipedia-like platform in Germany for open educational resources. Serlo is a curated library of educational materials that students can use as a resource for their studies and teachers can use for preparing their courses, with teachers thus being both users and creators of the content on the platform. Serlo has built a community of volunteer contributors, many of whom are highly experienced retired teachers who wish to dedicate their time to improving education for all. The contributors are organized based on their level of responsibility and editorial rights and are supported by a small in-house team. The process of content creation and editing is governed by rigorous rules and quality standards. By spreading their innovations to classrooms across the country, Serlo enables the entire education system to benefit from the country's most creative and capable teachers. All the content on the platform is licensed under creative commons, thus making it possible for users to download, modify, and reuse the materials in any way they want. The materials are carefully organized under the categorization of school curriculum and education levels, making it easy for teachers and students to locate exactly what they need.

The universal availability of high-quality and free materials created and curated by a community of teachers is a big shift from the private education publishing industry. Serlo took the bold approach of creating an open public good that is available for all teachers and learners without actively 'selling' their platform to the users. Since it also opted to be free and accessible to all, the platform is dependent on charitable donations. Year on year, the platform has experienced continuous growth in its user base, and 1.2 million teachers and students use it every month. During the pandemic, Serlo became one of the 'tech for education' resources supported by the German government.

Serlo encourages others to extend the platform to other languages, much like Wikipedia. It encourages volunteers from other countries to use the platform as a base to create content locally in their own language. In practice, Serlo has made its entire model of engaging teachers to spread innovation in education and the platform that supports it an 'open public good.'

### **PROJECT ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes)**

[www.hsc.unm.edu/echo](http://www.hsc.unm.edu/echo)

Project ECHO, created by Ashoka Fellow Dr Sanjeev Arora, is an ‘all teach and all learn’ platform that democratizes access to knowledge and best practices in public health and other fields and which can be applied in diverse local contexts. It has been created as an open public good enabling anyone to start and run a practice-based learning community supported by shared infrastructure and also to get plugged into the global network

The Project ECHO model allows for knowledge possessed by a handful of experts to be multiplied and distributed widely to deliver expertise where it is needed the most. Think about a doctor who is an expert in the diagnosis and treatment of a particular rare condition, with patients waiting for many months to meet her. Project ECHO enables her to pass on her expertise to a network of doctors who, in turn, become proficient in that particular condition. This enables an early diagnosis and timely treatment locally, saving time, money, and often, the lives of patients. The learning sessions are case-based and all the practitioners can share their specific challenges and get inputs from the group, thereby enabling an ‘all teach and all learn’ environment. While the learning sessions take place over a video conferencing facility, the platform allows for the collection of data across various partner networks and initiatives.

The platform’s digital infrastructure and methodology are available as open public goods to anyone who wishes to use these and is aligned to Project ECHO’s values of serving the underserved by democratizing learning through best practices and case-based learning, among others. The digital infrastructure enables the amplification and connection and capturing of data from interactions.

Multiple Research studies have confirmed the efficacy of the Project ECHO model in fields as diverse as mental health, oncology, pandemic response, and others. The model has enabled the participating learners to achieve a similar level of outcomes as the experts, thanks to its high engagement within its virtual learning community with peers where they share support, guidance, and feedback. The interaction is based on discussing and studying real cases presented by the entire group, with both the practitioners and experts learning and gaining value during the sessions. As a result, their collective understanding of how to disseminate and implement best practices continuously improves and expands.

As of 2021, Project ECHO has over 645,000 unique learners from 186 countries. The platform has been used to improve healthcare outcomes in many countries around the world, from diabetes to bone health, rheumatology, and perinatal health. More recently, the model is being adopted by partners to address systemic challenges of lack of practical knowledge in other fields, such as education and public service.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 3

# Empower with Data and Knowledge

Empowering stakeholders with access to relevant data, insights, knowledge, and tools can enable them to make data-driven decisions and strengthen existing solutions. The ability to explore, analyze, predict, and act on data and insights helps to identify future needs and problems and continues to seed new solutions. It makes the whole network more responsive and agile and enhances the ability to learn and evolve.

Making relevant data and insights more openly available benefits the entire ecosystem and drives better (and sometimes, joint) decision-making and innovation.



### **TRUSTCIRCLE**

[www.trustcircle.co](http://www.trustcircle.co)

TrustCircle, founded by Ashoka Fellow Sachin Chaudhry, envisions social-emotional learning to be core to the education system. It inspires educators/leaders/administrators to introduce two-to-three minutes of self-reflection time for students into their daily education curriculum. Students utilize these few minutes and TrustCircle's Social-Emotional Learning platform—a trusted and secure space—to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions on an everyday basis. Using data generated and processed by TrustCircle's Artificial Intelligence from these self-reflection activities, the platform empowers individuals to understand their emotions, see trends in their own well-being, and take proactive action.

In addition, TrustCircle trains and empowers administrators and mental health 'Stewards' to leverage TrustCircle's AI-driven well-being insights to perceive problems before they escalate into crises, help identify high-risk individuals/demographics, and take proactive action to promote health and wellness within their respective communities. Unlike other mental health solutions that are focused on crisis intervention, the TrustCircle well-being technology platform is focused on using data to foster prevention and early intervention at scale.

### HARA

[www.hara.ag](http://www.hara.ag)

HARA, an initiative of Ashoka Fellow Regi Wahyu, is a platform in Indonesia focused on increasing small-holder farmers' access to finance. Small holder farmers are typically excluded from formal financial services because banks and insurers lack reliable data to assess risk and understand needs.

HARA begins by enabling farmers to collect and input relevant personal data with an app which includes information such as land size and location, cultivation and yield, pest analysis, and particulars about market transactions. By mapping, registering, and verifying the landholdings and crop and income patterns of these farmers, HARA makes information about them visible and useful for other actors. Thanks to this crucial data, market players such as banks, insurance companies, and sellers of agricultural inputs find it easier to engage with the farmers and provide the services they earlier could not extend to them due to the lack of credible information. Further, HARA also uses AI to analyze supplementary data (like weather patterns and crop market prices) to support farmers with advice that can enable them to improve their practices, increase their incomes, and reduce risks.

HARA not only empowers the farmers, but all the players in the ecosystem to engage with the farmers in a productive and mutually beneficial manner. The platform orchestrates the interactions between the farmers and various market players including insurers, agri-input companies, and buyers of agricultural produce.

Credible data, collected and amplified through the platform, has effectively opened up the ecosystem for farmers. In this new system, the more the data collected—orchestrated by the HARA platform and amplified by the network partners—the better the decisions that every stakeholder makes, hence ensuring a virtuous cycle of participation and value exchange.

This is also referred to as the network effect and is one of the import drivers of the ability of platforms to scale exponentially, as every new participant brings value to the whole network.

In addition, HARA is built on blockchain technology: farmers own the data collected through the platform and are empowered to make choices about how it is used. Currently, 31,000 farmers in Indonesia are engaged on HARA

### **DONORSCHOOSE**

*[www.donorschoose.org](http://www.donorschoose.org)*

DonorsChoose, conceptualized and created by Ashoka Fellow Charles Best, is a peer-to-peer donation platform connecting public school teachers to donors. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, 94 percent of teachers in public schools in the United States spend 1.6 billion dollars in out-of-pocket expenses as teaching aids such as materials for experiments, art supplies, and books.<sup>9</sup> Though schools have a budgetary allocation for such additional materials, the amount is typically inadequate. DonorsChoose addresses this gap by connecting the teachers with donors who are willing to support them with resources to execute their dream projects.

On the one hand, the platform is enabling teachers to realize their projects; data analysis points them to what's trending in their grade level nationwide or near them, which acts as a catalyst that encourages and inspires them to create and post new projects. On the other hand, it has created a network of donors—most of whom are first-time givers to the public education system—who can choose to support any project they want to. Since 2000, as many as 638,139 teachers and 1.96 million projects have been supported through the platform. DonorsChoose has successfully increased the flow of educational resources directly to teachers from donors, in addition to already existing (but limited) government funds.

Moreover, by amplifying the insights from its data, DonorsChoose is able to influence the allocations by the school officials and the government, empowering them to make better decisions that are supported by data from the ground. Every project posted on the platform includes dozens of structured data points, from the location of the school to types of materials to be used, the grade level, subject, etc. DonorsChoose shares relevant data trends with the district and state, academia, and selected partners to show what is most needed in schools and, by corollary, to also influence policies and funding from the insights gained from this data. Hence, DonorsChoose creates an impact on the flow of resources to the teachers through direct giving and is also using data to improve the entire system of (government) resource allocation for schools.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED583062.pdf>



## Roles

Actors—whether organizations or individuals—and their interactions are at the heart of all human systems. When designing for system change, we don't only think of actors, but more importantly, of the functions or roles they take on within a system. Distinguishing roles from actors is important because a single actor can often play several roles in a system.

Social entrepreneurs typically create opportunities for actors to play new roles to enable change: for example, a village woman who becomes a local health entrepreneur providing access to important information, resources, and linkages; a neighborhood shop that becomes a local data collection center; or a student body that is elevated by the school to contribute to policies and budget planning. Each of these examples demonstrate how individuals can be enabled to play new roles as stakeholders.

Platforms are uniquely positioned to redefine roles, add new roles, and to make the actions of existing roles more visible, transparent, traceable, and manageable. It is a remarkable tool that can enable giving previously underrepresented people a voice and a license to act. Its ability to set and pre-define roles therefore allows for unlocking of agency and opens possibilities for participation.

How can platforms allow stakeholders to play new roles in the system?



Distribute  
the Ability  
to Solve

Unlock  
Agency



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 4

### Unlock Agency

To be able to achieve and sustain system change, social entrepreneurs often create an enabling environment that nurtures the freedom of choice for all individuals and organizations in the system and their ability to act positively. Such systems also effectively enable stakeholders to exercise agency and imagination to solve their own problems.

Platforms play a key role in this because of their inherent ability to enable not only stakeholders and networks to be organized in a decentralized and distributed way, but also to facilitate the exchange of value from many to many. Platforms can be designed so that they invite, stimulate and even drive others to hear the voice of those who were previously underrepresented in the system. When constructed deliberately to include those groups, platforms are a powerful tool to unlock agency by providing a space to speak up and be heard, to interact with peers, to spur action, and to co-create solutions while protecting their rights and interests.

However, this process needs to be designed in a manner that allows decentralised organising through the platform, including the required transparency (i.e., who does what, who can 'see' what, who can 'use' what), monitoring (who is accountable for what), and support (equipping all stakeholders to be able to join the exchange on equal terms).

### **ALISON**

[www.alison.com](http://www.alison.com)

Alison, a free online learning platform founded by Ashoka Fellow Mike Feerick, aims to provide access to high-quality education and training to all. Alison bridges the gap between the needs of businesses and employers and the lack of accessible opportunities for training and learning for many people. Alison brings together those who have expertise and those looking to gain skills and knowledge. It engages subject matter experts from education, business, industry, and government agencies to create and curate courses in every subject. These experienced professionals use their applied knowledge to create courses on Alison. Learners can learn anything, any time, from everywhere. Additionally, for a small fee they can receive a formal certification.

To empower the learners to exercise their agency, Alison offers free psychometric testing, routinely used by employers to evaluate candidates. This information allows Alison's users to understand their own strengths and weaknesses as compared to thousands of other users who took the same tests, and obtain suggestions from the platform on suitable career paths and training opportunities. Alison unlocks the agency of both learners and experts, thus creating a dynamic and accessible learning ecosystem.

Today, Alison is one of the world's largest online learning platforms, offering over 3,000+ courses to 20 million registered learners from 195 countries.

### **BUURTZORG**

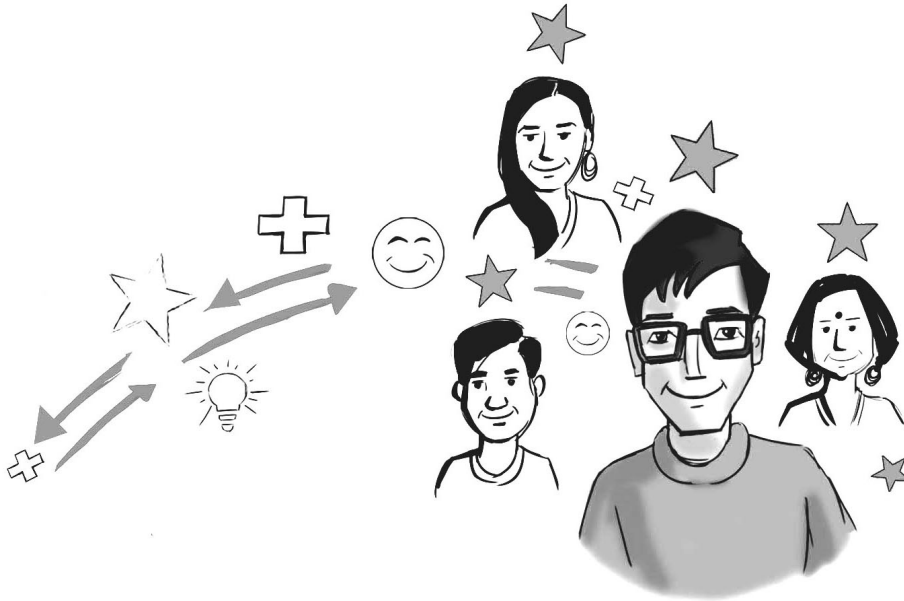
[www.buurtzorg.com](http://www.buurtzorg.com)

Buurtzorg, founded by Ashoka Fellow Jos de Blok, employs a new way of organizing with self-managed teams. This innovation is supported by a platform dedicated to igniting the power of self-steering teams of nurses providing community care (at home and for the elderly) in the Netherlands.

Buurtzorgweb is a web-based software platform built specifically to reduce administrative bureaucracy, increase productivity, and improve the quality of care provided by the over-15,000 nurses interacting on their platform. Buurtzorgweb supports teams in their caregiving, teamwork, and communications, and provides access to the Buurtzorg community. All the information on the platform—around performance, interventions, and outcomes—is transparent and each team can compare their performance with other teams. One important interaction facilitated on the platform is the sharing of protocols and solutions of how to deliver care to resolve a patient's health care challenge by discussing and learning from each other.

Thanks to Buurtzorg, home and community health care solutions have moved away from standardized protocols dictated top-down by health authorities and insurers to the actual professionals: the nurses. This practice has unlocked the agency of health professionals, empowered the nurses to do what's best for the patient, thus igniting distributed leadership. Not only is Buurtzorg's client/patient satisfaction the highest in the country, a direct result of this novel way of organizing has reduced the cost of care by 40 percent.

By communicating collective knowledge and exchanging care solutions and team performance as well as other allied information on the platform, nurses are becoming increasingly well-informed. The best-practices shared and fed back into the larger health ecosystem (health insurers, health advisors to the government, etc.) are driving important changes to achieve better health outcomes. Currently, Buurtzorgweb is not only used by Buurtzorg, but also by 60 other organizations in the Netherlands, all of which have improved their quality of care.



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 5

### **Distribute the Ability to Solve**

The core of this design principle is to enable stakeholders in the system to become better at solving a problem together. This principle stems from recognizing that a number of actors need to be involved in solving a societal problem and that each may have one's own way of viewing the problem and contributing to the solution.

Engaging these stakeholders in solving the problem requires co-creation, which is a continuous, creative, and interactive process that challenges the views of participants and combines the expertise of the actors in novel ways. **The creation of contextual solutions can be enabled by enhancing their capabilities with relevant tools and resources (data, knowledge, connections, and so on) to innovate, as well as with engaging new and different stakeholders to contribute to the solution.** The increased ability and agency of the actors develops resilience in the system to respond to new problems.

### **JOKKOSANTÉ**

[www.jokkosante.org](http://www.jokkosante.org)

Founded by Ashoka Fellow Adama Kane, JokkoSanté is an online platform in Senegal that supports access to medicines by enabling citizens to locate and procure the medications they need. Users collect points on the mobile platform when they donate unused medicines, which can be used later to purchase or redeem medicines when they have a new prescription. Employers can reward points to their employees and their resellers/customers, and citizen organizations and private sector CSR partners can purchase points to give to people in need, mobilizing a diverse set of partners in the progress of the system change towards universal access to medicines. Points can also be purchased online (with a credit card) anywhere on the globe and sent back to families in Senegal. Besides, the platform's transparency and ease of use also helps curb corruption, counterfeit drugs, and the sale of illegal drugs.

JokkoSanté's platform, in which an ecosystem of diverse partners is enabled to contribute, brings an alternative way of getting access to medicines and through this, engendering preventive health measures. The platform ignites the power to solve the issue of access to medicines, by engaging new actors who were previously not involved. Not only individual users, but public and private pharmacies, companies, and citizen organizations too are increasingly involved in contributing to access through this virtual pharmacy.

### TRUSTCIRCLE

[www.trustcircle.co](http://www.trustcircle.co)

(also featured on page 22)

TrustCircle provides a scalable social-emotional learning platform that can be integrated into different institutions and contexts. The platform empowers the institution to take care of the well-being and mental health of its people through best practices and protocols in mental health prevention, along with the highest standards of data security and privacy for users of the platform. TrustCircle presents institutions with a new role as the custodian of the well-being of its people and provides a simple and effective route to fulfil this function. Engaging institutions closest to people—schools, civil society organizations, or workplaces—in fostering mental health prevention and early intervention is a significant shift from the system where it is individuals themselves who seek mental health help and treatment from professionals.

Here, it is institutions that provide the impetus to their communities to seek preventive mental health care. Involving a wide network of partners in prevention enables problems to be addressed earlier which results in a smaller number of cases requiring mental health interventions.

TrustCircle works as a closed-loop platform for these institutions: every institution has its own independent instance of the platform that is secure and accessible via all devices. Take the example of a school. TrustCircle provides a fully customized white labeled<sup>10</sup> social-emotional learning platform to support the well-being of students, staff, and administrators. Children are encouraged to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions in a secure and confidential space. The AI software at the backend utilizes machine learning algorithms to perform sentiment analysis that helps identify and flag changes and significant deviations in a person's moods that may require a response from a practicing specialist. Only in the case of an alarming trend would a specialist be alerted about a specific child, who could then initiate a direct interaction, if needed, involving counselors and the administration.

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<sup>10</sup> White labeling provides customized branding for the partner institution.



### **FUNDACIÓN CAPITAL**

[www.fundacioncapital.org](http://www.fundacioncapital.org)

Fundación Capital, founded by Ashoka Fellow Yves Mouri, uses a platform to orchestrate a set of stakeholders—such as governments, financial institutions, and citizen organizations—to work together towards full financial inclusion of vulnerable citizens. Through the platform and offline efforts, communities and families in extreme poverty get access to financial education (linked to the subsidies they receive from the government) to cultivate their savings behaviour. An ‘economic citizenship’ graduation program—including, but not limited to training with digital tools, access to capital and coaching—is also available through the platform.

The platform also offers several other digital interventions to its larger network of partners. These solutions are provided locally by a different set of partners, such as mobile banking services, finance-related educational services on tablets and smartphones, e-learning modules, games, a collective financing platform, and over 18 apps that focus on economic ventures for vulnerable families, each targeting different groups (youth, parents, and illiterate populations). Through the platform, citizens also gain access to mobile banking services that are provided by formal financial institutions. To date, the platform has delivered access to financial products/services to 4.5 million vulnerable families since it was created 12 years ago.

Fundación Capital facilitates online modules to be added or adapted by a different set of partners aimed at different local contexts and populations. The platform ignites the power to solve, region by region, country by country, by diverse sets of stakeholders. Its programs have advanced the financial capabilities of more than 6 million people across 19 countries in Latin America and Africa.

# Rules

Rules refer to formal laws and regulations as well as less formal norms, incentives, and expectations that influence the structure of a system and how it functions. To create system change, social entrepreneurs often engage in the creation of, or change in, formal and informal rules that govern a system and the behavior of its stakeholders.

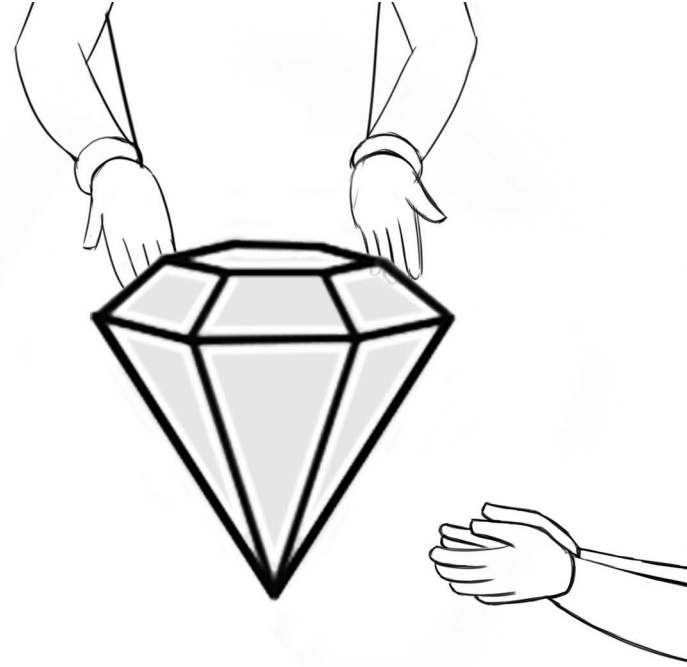
Platforms are well placed to support this form of change because they are designed to engage large numbers of people and stakeholders in a voluntary value exchange.

By participating on the platform, the stakeholders agree to attribute value to certain things and adhere to the rules that help maintain the value. Platforms also set certain rules within which stakeholders are expected to engage. Together, this begins to create new behaviors in society.

The data generated through engagement provides the platform the insights and intelligence to set new rules quickly and efficiently in response to the behavior of actors.

How can platforms help transform the rules that govern the system?





## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 6

### **Enable Open Value Creation**

One of the opportunities provided by platforms is that rules can be set in a manner that allow for unlocking value creation and exchange by many actors. Instead of locking in and leveraging value to benefit only shareholders, platforms for social good can be designed so that the value created is transmitted to the stakeholders in the ecosystem.

Not only are platforms uniquely positioned to create value jointly with (new and other) stakeholders, they are also well-positioned to redistribute (differently) the created value amongst the stakeholders in the ecosystem. Several elements are important in this design principle: the platform's ability to be transparent, open to all (more people and different kinds of partners), and its capacity to facilitate joint value creation.

### **SOLSHARE**

[www.me-solshare.com](http://www.me-solshare.com)

(also featured on page 15)

SOLshare is redesigning the solar energy market by using the bottom-up approach in the production and supply of electricity. Not only is value jointly created through the platform by stakeholders previously not included in the system, but it is also made traceable and is monetized, thus radically revolutionizing the entire energy market. While the traditional model assumes centralized production and supply that leaves a significant proportion of people based in rural areas without access to energy, SOLshare's off-the-grid system change platform enables everyone to become an energy producer, seller and/or consumer, with a decentralized and distributed model of value exchange. More recently, SOLshare has ventured into the field of e-mobility where the platform has been leveraged to power electric rickshaws across the country with the aim of adding them as a moving energy storage facility.

SOLshare has created a regulatory sandbox environment where governments, market players and academia are exploring ways to connect this decentralized solar-power production 'plant' (i.e., connected village grids) with the centralized national electricity grid. SOLshare's platform is a powerful infrastructural tool to advance a national utility-model that allows for joint energy planning between the public and private sector in which the low-income, off-the-grid, often rural villages can become national partners in solar energy production.

### **WHEELMAP**

[www.wheelmap.org](http://www.wheelmap.org)

Wheelmap is a crowdsourced online map for locating and rating wheelchair accessible places. Created by Ashoka Fellow Raul Krauthausen in 2010, it is based on OpenStreetMap (OSM).<sup>11</sup> Currently, the map is available in 30+ languages. Through this platform, anyone can find and rate wheelchair-accessible places using a simple traffic light system (green, yellow, red). Currently, 2.3+ million cafés, libraries, swimming pools, and many other publicly-accessible places have been captured on Wheelmap.

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<sup>11</sup> OpenStreetMap is a collaborative project to create a free editable geographic database of the world.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 6 | ENABLE OPEN VALUE CREATION

The platform offers tools to organize and host both offline and hybrid events to map places. Events are curated to generate engagement and interest and to help build the contributor community. The model is designed to be an enabling environment for individuals, local businesses, municipalities, and others to contribute and trigger improvements in public and private infrastructure by facilitating a joint approach to tackling accessibility issues.

In addition to the existing community, businesses have also increasingly discovered Wheelmap for themselves. Small and big companies have held Wheelmap team events, generating a huge impact. For example, employees of a global online travel agency mapped over 30,000 wheelchair-accessible places in two weeks.

The generated data sets, published under the Open Database License (ODbL), are available to everyone and can be used free of charge. The apps and the data empower users to become ‘prosumers’ who produce and consume information at the same time, jointly and openly creating value for all.

### **MEDIC**

[www.medic.org](http://www.medic.org)

The way Health systems are designed and set up often excludes a significant number of people from care. According to the World Health Organization, half of the world’s population is unable to obtain essential health services. Doctors, nurses, and facilities are either inaccessible or unaffordable, or are under-resourced. These gaps in the health system are bridged by millions of community health workers (CHWs) worldwide, who provide basic health care to the world’s hardest-to-reach communities and link them to healthcare services. CHWs are committed and trusted members of the communities in which they live and work and are often the first point of care for most families, especially in remote, rural, and underserved communities. Unfortunately, most CHWs are not integrated into the formal health system and are largely unsupported after a few days of pre-service training.

Medic was founded by Ashoka Fellow Josh Nesbit to improve access to healthcare for last-mile populations. By empowering locally-based community health workers with open-source mobile phone-based solutions, Medic is transforming and strengthening the role of decentralized rural public health systems to achieve universal health coverage. A powerful aspect of igniting this

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 6 | ENABLE OPEN VALUE CREATION

system change is the radical open sharing and collaboration through the Community Health Toolkit (CHT),<sup>12</sup> a leading open-source platform for digital health and advanced community health systems. Medic operates as the steward and key contributor to the CHT, in partnership with a group of other leading organizations (examples: technical partners, governments, and citizen organizations) that support the development of digital health initiatives in the hardest-to-reach areas.

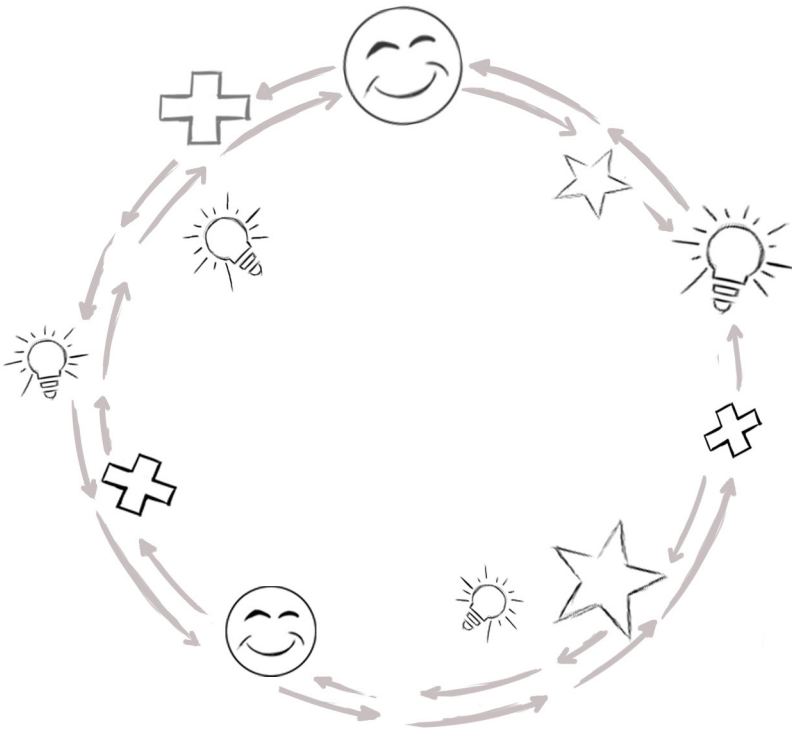
The Medic platform provides a collection of open-source technologies and open access design, technology, and implementer resources that help build and deploy digital tools for community health. In this way, while creating value openly with other partners, it supports CHWs with simple open-source technology that is flexible enough for CHWs to themselves shape the way in which the technology can be used. The tools include OpenMRS (an open-source mobile electronic medical record system),<sup>13</sup> text-based forms for structured data collection, and tools for mobile diagnostics (like complete blood count, and diagnosis of malaria and TB). According to OpenHub.net, Medic's Core Framework is in the top 10 percent of highly active open-source projects around the globe.

An illustration of their approach to enable open value creation is the collaborative creation of OppiaMobile, an open-source mobile learning platform especially designed for delivering learning content, multimedia, and quizzes in low-broadband settings which provide the enabling environment for learners, tutors, and course authors to jointly create educational value, ultimately supporting the CHWs. The platform is designed to give a boost to many of the partners in the co-creation process to contribute to the envisioned system-change that will enable all CHWs around the world to grow to their full potential, thereby contributing to universal health coverage.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://communityhealthtoolkit.org>

<sup>13</sup> <https://openmrs.org>



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 7

### Seek Rapid Evolution

Platforms can be designed such that appropriate conditions are created for problem-solving to be distributed among many stakeholders and also for solutions to evolve as the problem unfolds. This way, the solutions are not static; rather, they respond rapidly to challenges, opportunities, and the needs of local contexts.

By playing the role of the connector and the orchestrator of interactions in the network, the platform can help steer the learnings within the networks and enable the emergent and adapted solutions and innovations to spread. The interactions, data and feedback loops provide crucial insights and clues on how the needs of the different groups/users of the network are changing and how the platform needs to evolve to continue to enable users to solve their problems, share their experience, and innovate and build on top of other solutions



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 7 | SEEK RAPID EVOLUTION

### **ATMAGO**

[www.atmaconnect.org](http://www.atmaconnect.org)

Founded by Ashoka Fellow Meena Palaniappan, AtmaGo, a peer-to-peer online networking platform in Indonesia with more than eight million users, is designed to connect people in communities with the objective of mutual help through information exchange related to user concerns/problems, and community action mobilization. With a combination of hyper-localized social media and community development programs, AtmaGo is changing the way neighbors interact and support each other. It allows people to read, write and comment on posts to report problems, discuss solutions, share events, and find jobs.

To continue to be the go-to place for community interaction, AtmaGo conducts user-centric design explorations on a regular basis to identify the ways in which users choose to use the platform and promptly integrates new features to respond to these needs. For example, when AtmaGo realized that users were using the platform to alert each other about floods and extreme weather conditions in their areas, it quickly integrated a government flood alert system. This enabled people to immediately get alerted about emergency situations and spread the word in their communities, reducing losses.

AtmaGo also realized that people were using the platform to implement change in their community and to come together for certain actions. To support this, the platform added new functionalities that allow people to create local collective action campaigns that spur people to come together. Thus, AtmaGo evolved from being a local information sharing platform to becoming a platform that activates and supports changemakers. As a consequence of the success of these functions, AtmaGo is now developing a pathway for external donors to support measurable social impact at the community level through the platform.

### **ALISON**

[www.alison.com](http://www.alison.com)

(also featured on page 28)

Alison began its journey as an open learning platform which, over the years, evolved to become smarter by catering to the needs of its users by creating new courses and offerings.

Alison uses data from the learners and industry to identify the needs of both and ignite the creation of relevant courses by the experts. It also nudges users to explore opportunities that offer potential career paths. Additionally, Alison's psychometric testing, which has been seamlessly integrated into the platform, provides its users with valuable information about their own potential and strengths and offers suggestions on further self-development. What started as what may well be one of the world's first free learning platforms is now evolving into a personal empowerment, development, upskilling, and employment platform.

At the same time, by making its online tools available to all as a free learning management system, Alison permits organizations to use its technology and know-how for internal training purposes. This allows the company to earn 20 percent of the revenue from the advertising that Alison gets, thus making it a financially viable model. This has changed the dynamics of training and upskilling of workforce from being an expense for companies to becoming a source of revenue for them. This also increases participation on its platform while converting its learning management system into an open public good.

## Relationships

System change strategies often tend to review the existing relationships among the actors in the system and also seek to create new connections and/or bring in new actors for enhanced and more effective affiliations and to eliminate challenges. For example, a community built to provide feedback on public services can be made to grow from being a passive receiver of benefits and services to becoming a co-creator of, and an active stakeholder in, the public services system. This community's voice and feedback are heard and inform the decisions of the government. By transforming relationships between the stakeholders, social entrepreneurs can fine-tune the workings of the system to produce better results.

Platforms can be designed to forge new linkages, loop in (underrepresented) groups, and connect existing stakeholders in novel, meaningful ways.

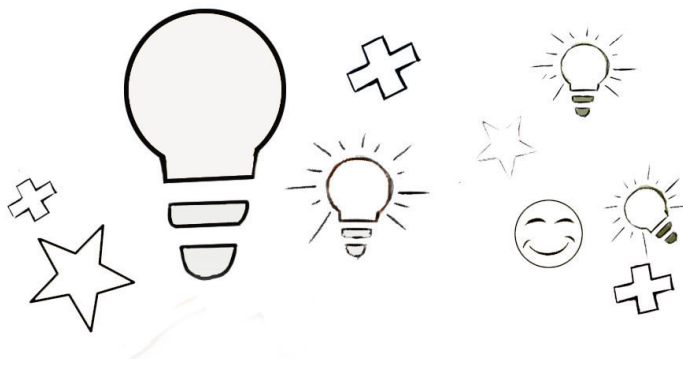
*How can platforms  
change relationships  
between the actors  
in the system?*



*Cultivate  
Change  
Offline*



*Catalyze  
Interactions*



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 8

### **Catalyze Interactions**

Platforms can nurture the practice of distributed leadership and joint decision-making to co-create solutions that engage the entire system—state, civil society, and market players—to resolve the various elements of the problem. They can create fresh ways for stakeholders to connect, communicate and exchange value and become self-propagating networks that spread the new behavior of tackling societal issues collaboratively. **The ease, frequency, and low cost of interactions is the lifeline of any platform, and if designed for, can enhance the system by facilitating continuous feedback-loops and sharing of learnings and best practices.**

### **DONORSCHOOSE**

[www.donorschoose.org](http://www.donorschoose.org)

(also featured on page 24)

DonorsChoose connects two unique networks—teachers and donors—constituencies that had no way to interact with each other earlier (75 percent of contributions on the platform come from sponsors who don't know the teachers they are donating to). A transparent process enables the community of volunteer teachers to vet each new project request after which the purchasing of the materials is arranged and sent directly to the teachers (as opposed to sending cash). Through this platform, contributors are also incentivized to continue giving: DonorsChoose guarantees that 95 percent of a donation is spent on the projects and only one percent goes towards administrative costs, and four percent for fundraising. Since 2000, 5.13 million contributors have donated over 1.21 billion dollars for 2.14 million projects posted on the platform by 680,000 teachers

### **PROJECT ECHO**

[www.hsc.unm.edu/echo](http://www.hsc.unm.edu/echo)

(also featured on page 20)

The power of the change that Ashoka Fellow Dr Sanjeev Arora's initiative Project ECHO creates lies in catalyzing peer-learning interactions that allow for valuable and rare expertise to be distributed to a network of practitioners by subject experts. Since Project ECHO's learning sessions are designed as case discussions and there is a limit of 50 percent on instruction time, the sessions become interactions where everybody teaches and everybody learns. By connecting the practitioners in the learning network and enabling the interaction between them and experts on its infrastructure, Project ECHO is allowing for new relationships to form in the system, resulting in learning and improvement in outcomes.

### **ATMAGO**

[www.atmaconnect.org](http://www.atmaconnect.org)

(also featured on page 41)

AtmaGo was built on the premise that people want to help each other. Recognizing that to create a vibrant network there must be enough interaction and useful information shared on the platform, AtmaGo provides the digital infrastructure to enable this for its users. To catalyze interactions, AtmaGo conducts community outreach and citizen journalism training to get at least 10 percent of users to become ‘super users’ (i.e., those who contribute content on a regular basis), which ensures enough activity on the platform to enable it to stay relevant, timely, and engaging. Over time, AtmaGo further developed and grew the type of interactions it was enabling through its platform. It has progressed from engendering a simple relationship between neighbors to share useful information, to a platform that is spawning collective action. AtmaGo provides the infrastructure for people to come together and stimulate local action groups for solving community problems, thus improving their quality of life.



## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 9

### **Cultivate Change Offline**

Social Entrepreneurs work on complex large-scale societal challenges, the solutions to which require multi-layered approaches. Core to this approach is a mindset change that needs to occur in the actual behavior of all stakeholders in the system (aligning, ultimately, for better outcomes). For this behavioral change to take place, social entrepreneurs often need to work with people, communities and partners offline, cultivating this change and learning how best to make it work in specific and localized contexts. This multi-layered approach requires orchestrating certain interactions at-scale on the platform, while also engaging stakeholders offline or on the ground.

Platforms for the ‘good of all’ often focus on resolving the challenges faced by the most marginalized and worst affected populations. However, an online platform comes with its own limitations for these populations, such as poor access and limited digital connectivity, low literacy, and other contextual difficulties. This necessitates offline interventions in order to leverage the power of the platform for everyone. Importantly, this holds true not just for the previously excluded or underrepresented groups, but also for partners and stakeholders who often need to be engaged offline too in order to create a system change.

The platform thus becomes a unified—but not uniform space—where all people, partners and networks can contribute to a shared goal to change mindsets and behavior. As a result, many platform-powered impact models developed by Ashoka Fellows also have a significant offline component that is integral to the success and impact of the platform.



### **HARA**

[www.hara.ag](http://www.hara.ag)

(also featured on page 23)

In the case of HARA, an Indonesian agricultural data exchange platform, farmers contribute their data to the platform and in return, get financial services, advisory, agricultural input supplies, and market linkages. While the solution empowers farmers and connects them to a much-needed ecosystem of services, the barriers to entry for them is impossibly high. Most do not have smartphones that would enable them to directly participate on the platform. To handle this, HARA needed to create a layer in between—the HARA Entrepreneur—who gets trained in using the technology to map the field of the farmers and upload their data to the platform for a small fee. They also play a leading role in enrolling farmers and educating them about the HARA platform and how it could benefit them. Every HARA Entrepreneur is able to service approximately 100 farmers.

### **PINBOX SOLUTIONS**

[www.pinboxsolutions.com](http://www.pinboxsolutions.com)

(also featured on page 14)

Today, pinBox Solutions has become an acknowledged global leader in the field of micro-pensions, and has built a vast network of partnerships with key stakeholders interested in contributing to the cause of saving the next billion from poverty in their old age.

The combination of a ready-to-deploy digital micro-pension administration and delivery platform, easily customizable field-tested retirement literacy and training toolkits, and a unique approach to pension inclusion is attracting growing interest from both existing and new partners who are keen to run with the pinBox Solutions model and apply it to their local context.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 9 | CULTIVATE CHANGE OFFLINE

In this way, the pinBox Solutions platform is igniting the global spreading of system change. Disseminating its experience and implementation know-how through research and policy papers (meant for advocacy), the platform is also strengthening offline network and partnerships to trigger an irreversible change in their partners' offline realities: the platform's online interventions and resources encourage cooperative and collaborative multi-stakeholder action on digital micro-pension inclusion, offline.

### **FUNDACIÓN CAPITAL**

[www.fundacioncapital.org](http://www.fundacioncapital.org)

(also featured on page 33)

Similarly, Fundación Capital has been working (across different countries) for over a decade on solutions that grow financial inclusion for extremely poor families through close collaboration with governments, formal banking institutions, the community, and training organizations. This has resulted in a vast offline network and a large number of partnerships interested in contributing towards this goal. Partners are encouraged to upload Fundación Capital's financial education interventions and mobile banking on their own platform, thus enabling partners to use the modules to give access to finance in the communities they work with. This allows for (almost) independent replication for existing as well as new partners.

Several interventions such as consumption support (small monetary stipends), savings promotion (through formal banking institutions), asset transfers (conditional cash transfers to be used as 'seed capital'), life skills and business training plus financial coaching (personal coaches regularly visit participants' homes), and technical skills training (specific training for managing their businesses), are run partly on the platform and partly run/managed by partners' offline interventions. The platform is thus playing a critical role to progress the system change through semi-independent replication

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Through this research we have learned that platforms hold the potential to create system change at scale because of their unique qualities, viz, the ability to connect exponentially large numbers of stakeholders in networks that openly exchange value, interact and evolve, while activating agency and catalyzing participation. We anticipate that the citizen sector will increasingly adopt platforms as a tool to scale-up system change.

Platforms have already changed the world of business; we are also witnessing a global trend towards building digital public infrastructure by governments. This means that progressively, essential functions such as banking, tapping into government services and entitlements, access to healthcare, participation in local governance, etc. will be accessed digitally. With such tech infrastructure becoming a common feature of modern life, minimizing exclusion is a priority we, as a society, need to be vigilant about.

Global access to smartphones and mobile internet remains unequal and occurs primarily along socio-economic conditions. Further, there exists a gender gap too: according to the 2020 GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report,<sup>14</sup> women are 20 percent less likely to use mobile internet globally. It should be noted that ironically, solutions that are exclusively digital and are implemented at scale could lead to the unintended consequence of the further exclusion of already marginalized groups. Which is why protecting certain groups that are more vulnerable (for example, children), is essential.

As in any emerging field, there are no proven playbooks, many questions continue to remain unanswered and, to date, only a limited number of demonstrated successes define this domain. However, what we do know is that social entrepreneurs have a pivotal role to play in influencing how platforms and digital public infrastructure are designed, implemented and used in the world to ensure they indeed serve 'the good of all.' In order to play this role, it is critical for social entrepreneurs to familiarize themselves with platforms and to become more aware of the myriad ways in which such technology can empower or disempower society. Failing to do so holds many potential negative implications and risks for society.

We have also learned that building platforms is an expensive proposition and outside the realm of expertise for most social entrepreneurs. It is a risky, difficult and time-intensive endeavor that requires significant in-house tech-savviness and high capital investment, aspects that have proven to be a huge barrier to entry for many social entrepreneurs. Hence, we believe it is critical and urgent

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

to create an ecosystem that supports and advances platforms that are designed for the ‘the good of all.’

To begin with, we identified three broad areas that require immediate attention and should be supported further:

- a. Grow the citizen sector’s capacity to leverage platforms and technology.
- b. Catalyze the appropriate funding to figure out new business models and sustainability mechanisms for design, experimentation and scale of innovative (and sometimes risky) endeavors.
- c. Develop knowledge that can be leveraged by practitioners.

Moreover, through our ongoing dialogue with philanthropy leaders, hands-on engagement with Ashoka Fellows and tech leaders, as well as in the interviews with Fellows featured in this paper, we have distilled several important considerations for social entrepreneurs, funders, tech leaders and others who are inspired to dedicate resources to this emergent field:

### **Pay careful attention to design and governance**

Sustaining focus on social impact, while simultaneously seeking the resources needed to run and grow the platform, can be challenging. Often, since the social entrepreneur is the sole custodian of the values and intent of the platform, it is important to ensure that the social impact potential of the venture is not undermined. Hence, social entrepreneurs need to be particularly attentive to the kind of resources they bring in, while at the same time, focusing on hardcoding impact and system change into the DNA of their platform. For example, platforms can be designed to decentralize and distribute decision-making and data ownership and to develop policies that empower the users and achieve the purpose of the initiative. However, there is also always the probability of unexpected and unintended consequences and the need to develop an ability to mitigate and fix mistakes and hold the platform accountable. While the design principles outlined in this paper are a useful compass for building platforms, more nuanced knowledge is required in this field for social entrepreneurs and funders to make informed decisions in this predominantly uncharted territory.

### **Invest in new sustainability models**

There can be a tension between the sustainability of large-scale platform-based ventures and making the impact available to all. Some organizations, such as Alison, run their platforms as businesses (generating revenue through advertisements) while still focusing on making access free to the end-user. Others use the platform as a service model (i.e., charging a fee to the institutions that use their platform) such as TrustCircle, which provides sustainability but limits the ability of the platform to scale only for paying partners. A few initiatives have found ways of being completely free through charitable funding (examples: Wikipedia and Project ECHO); however, this requires

significant and constant infusion of charitable capital. Acknowledging that a platform is a tool that allows for organizing in a radically different way means that supporting this new structure requires new business models to arise. How this could play out for platforms for system change requires more research and funding. We believe that developing (and therefore investing in) new creative blended models that support platforms for system change as public infrastructure is one of the most important opportunities of our age.

### **Develop new metrics of success**

We have seen how the funders supporting this emerging field are relying mainly on their experience on financing technology in the private sector, where technological innovations are mostly evaluated by the ability to maximize user numbers and the time they spend on the platform. Evaluating success of social impact organizations on these measures alone could derail solutions that are socially valuable, create real change but take longer to adapt and spread. While the frameworks to measure the success of platforms for system change do not exist as yet, the measures borrowed from the private sector do not do justice to the goal of system change. Hence, it is very important that new funding mechanisms and measures of success are developed for this emerging field.

### **Leverage technology as a tool for exponential scale**

It is essential that support to social entrepreneurs who are using platforms should focus on empowering and equipping them to think of technology as a driver of a transformative innovation and system change, as opposed to only seeing it as way of optimizing operations and improving efficiency.

### **Identify pathways to easier, cheaper, and faster adoption and reuse of technology**

It is an assumption that merely designing technology as reusable building blocks, creating white-labeled products and open-source solutions, and making them openly available will allow for easier adoption of technology by the citizen sector. While a lot of open-source software already exists, it is not used optimally: we observed that one of the reasons for this is that many social entrepreneurs don't have the experience and know-how to leverage this potential. They require support in defining their technology needs and in making sense of what is out there and how it can be used to further their innovation.

### **Bridge the tech talent capacity and availability gap**

Using platforms as a tool to change the system requires significant in-house tech savviness. Almost all examples in our study either had a relevant technology background or brought high-caliber tech leadership into the team early on. Such leadership attracts the technological talent needed to build and sustain successful platforms. However, tech talent crossing over from the private sector comes with certain approaches that are useful for maximizing growth and traction but not necessarily for system change and impact. Finding ways to bridge this gap is important.

## SUMMARY

When carefully designed for it, platforms allow for the creation of new roles for people and institutions to unlock their agency in becoming changemakers. They can connect large networks of people and institutions in continuous value exchanges. Further, by using data and knowledge judiciously, platforms can help these networks get better and smarter at solving problems. At the same time, platforms provide an enabling digital backbone that makes it easier for stakeholders to adopt at-scale interventions and allows for the system change to spread with speed.

We believe that the design principles that we have developed (built on top of the core values distilled by Societal Platform) will be useful for anyone looking to use platforms to change the system and create exponential change. When explaining each principle we selected the work of those Fellows whose work explicitly highlighted the principle. Interestingly, we could see that most of the design principles manifested in the work of the majority of Ashoka Fellows. This leads us to conclude that when empowered with these principles, social entrepreneurs can significantly amplify the impact they create by designing and implementing platforms for system change.

These foundational design principles are a point of reference, a helpful compass to keep in mind when taking decisions regarding the design of the platform as well as the underlying technology that supports it. The alignment with these principles is a continuum, meaning that every organization can keep getting better at the following: unlocking agency, empowering itself and users with data and knowledge, distributing the ability to solve, building open public goods, catalyzing interactions, and enabling open value creation. The principles are not prescriptive; rather, they are liberating as they can help the entrepreneur design for system change and scale.

These design principles can serve as a cue for the rapid evolution for the platform so as to stay relevant and useful for its network of users in the face of constant change.

The role of social entrepreneurs in this emerging field is critical. More investment, knowledge, support, and attention are required to grow the capacity of social entrepreneurs and their organizations to leverage the power of platforms to address societal problems at scale. It is an opportunity the citizen sector cannot miss to effect exponential impact and change.

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